

CRITICAL INQUIRY AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Open Learning Initiative, OLLive-UP, Spring Semester, 2021

Seminar Leader: Dr. Gorana Mišić

Credits: 2 US credits, 4 ECTS

Class times: Tuesdays, 10:45-12:15

Location: SR2, P98

Email: g.misic@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 13:30-14:30 by appointment, please [sign-up here](#)

Course Description

This course will contribute to the skills necessary for being an independent thinker, and to improve your ability to deal with complex reasoning and argumentation, as well as to research and evaluate sources and data with a critical eye, and apply interdisciplinary information. The first part of the course focuses on the foundations for critical inquiry: concept formation and understanding what makes a good concept, understanding what constitutes 'evidence' and how we collect data, what is big data, how we analyse and interpret data, and how we form arguments.

In the second part of the course, we will start applying these understandings and engage in the analysis of different social problems. We will discuss questions such as: What are the social and behavioural consequences of the Coronavirus pandemic? Why is it difficult to achieve international climate cooperation? Why is the world and its resources mostly run by men? What better determines and explains development - economic growth or good governance? Why do people vote for corrupt politicians? Can democracy survive the Internet, social media, and fake news?

This is a discussion-based course; students are expected to arrive to class prepared and to actively contribute to class discussions.

Learning goals and objectives

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

- Further develop active listening and note-taking skills;
- Further develop analytical skills and analyse various social problems;
- Identify different perspectives, challenge the sources that they read, and seek alternative sources;
- Engage in verbal and written academic discussion (i.e. focused on building arguments supported by evidence) on a variety of topics related to contemporary social problems;
- Analyse and synthesize information; draw inferences from data; draw conclusions from arguments; and distinguish facts from opinion.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the highest standards of integrity and intellectual engagement in their academic work. Acts of academic misconduct will result in a disciplinary process and may lead to a Letter of Warning for a minor violation, or to failing an assignment/the course, or even suspension from the College in the case of more serious violations. For the Academic Integrity policy and procedure (including appeals), please check the Student Code of Conduct, especially Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the [Student Handbook](#).

Attendance

Attendance at ALL classes is expected. More than one absence (that is one session of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the participation grade for the course. Students must secure the approval of the course instructor in advance if they need to be absent from a class for any reason. Students are expected to arrive punctually for all classes. Late arrivals are disruptive, considered disrespectful, and can result in the final grade reduction. Being late for more than 10 minutes will count as an absence.

Missed classes: missed classes have to be made up by extra written assignments. These written assignments should be around 400 words long, and are to be sent to the instructor before the beginning of the missed class (Tuesdays, 11AM). The assignments should reflect on the key reading(s) assigned for the class and provide the author's critical review. These assignments are in principle not graded and should demonstrate that you engaged with the course materials for that session. Low quality of the assignment will, however, affect the participation grade. If the absence occurred for medical reasons, students don't have to submit a written assignment, but must inform the instructor in advance and provide a doctor's note. Please consult the [Student Handbook](#) for regulations governing periods of illness or leaves of absence.

Phone and laptop use in class: Laptop and tablet use is generally permitted in class when it is related to the course. Use of phones and persistent misuse of IT equipment will be treated as academic misconduct, and will negatively reflect in the overall grade.

Assignments and Assessment

Participation and preparation: This includes in-class and online participation in discussions, as well as preparing the readings, and short pre- and post- class assignments when applicable. Good class participation means listening and connecting to what your colleagues said, referring to the literature, and bringing relevant questions and examples to the discussion. Pre- or post- class assignments will be communicated in advance through Google Classroom notifications. These will include tasks such as answering a short question, reflection, or identifying discussion questions based on the readings.

Class debate (session 12, April 27): The aim of the debate is to practice critical thinking skills, research skills, speaking and argumentation skills, as well as the ability to discuss different perspectives on a controversial issue. Separate instructions will be provided for this session.

Class notes: you are required to keep class notes regularly (i.e. **weekly**) – in a Google document which you will share with the instructor. The instructor will check and assess class notes every four weeks. Class notes are assessed based on the comprehensiveness (coverage of the discussion) and organisation. Please note that your notes *should not* be excerpts or sentences from the key readings,

instructor's verbatim sentences, or notes from instructor's slides. Your notes should demonstrate your active listening skills and thinking process.

Fact sheet is a handout with facts and data about the topic, collected from different sources. It also includes discussion questions. Each session in the weeks 5-12 will have a Fact Sheet contribution by a student or pair of students. The Fact Sheet needs to be well structured, formatted, and organised, informative; it has to raise relevant questions and examples, include a reference list, and should demonstrate your research skills and engagement with the literature and evidence. The Fact Sheet should be 2-3 pages long, and must be sent to the instructor the latest on the **Monday before the class, by 11AM**. Sign up for the topics will be done during the first session.

Position Paper presents an arguable opinion about an issue – based on the course topics, but you are welcome to propose a different topic too. The goal of a position paper is to develop your argument, ensure that you are addressing multiple sides of the issue, present it in a well-structured, easy to follow manner, support your argument with evidence to ensure the validity of your claims, as well as to refute the counterclaims to show that you are well informed about both sides.

- The Position Paper should be between 1000 and 1200 words long.
- You should confirm the topic with the instructor by the **end of March**.
- Paper outline (bullet points with ideas and the argument) is due by **11 April 2021, end of day**.
- The final paper is due any time before **11 May 2021, end of day**. **Please note that late submissions cannot be accepted due to the graduation deadline.**

Grade Breakdown

Participation and preparation: 25%

Class debate: 10%

Class notes: 15%

Fact sheet: 20%

Position Paper: 30%

Please note:

- The fact sheet and the position paper are separate assignments: the topic of the fact sheet *should not* also be the topic of the position paper.
- You need to get a passing grade for *all assignments and requirements* in order to pass the course. Failing one of the course components means failing the whole course.
- All assignments should be submitted through the course Google Classroom. Assignments sent by email will not be accepted.

Policy on Late Submission of Assignments

Assignments that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). An assignment that is late for more than 24 hours can be accepted if submitted within four weeks of the deadline - and cannot receive a grade higher than C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. In exceptional circumstances, *which need to be communicated to the instructor in advance*, students can request an extension.

Schedule

DATE	TOPIC AND READINGS
1 February 2	<p>Introduction: What is Critical Inquiry?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Introduction to the course: requirements, expectations, and content ● Signing up for assignments and topics
2 February 9	<p>The Nature of Scientific Inquiry: Theory and Concepts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is a (good) concept? Why do concepts matter? ● How do we define concepts? What is concept formation? ● What is conceptual stretching? <p>REQUIRED READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collier, D., & Levitsky, S. (1997). Democracy with adjectives: Conceptual innovation in comparative research. <i>World politics</i>, 49(3), 430-451. <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gerring, J. (1999). What makes a concept good? A criterial framework for understanding concept formation in the social sciences. <i>Polity</i>, 31(3), 357-393.
3 February 16	<p>Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is the difference between data and information? ● What constitutes 'evidence'? How do we collect data? ● How do we know what the data "tells" us – how do we analyse it? ● What is an argument? <p>REQUIRED READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Corbetta (2003). Quantitative and Qualitative Research: A Comparison. In <i>Social research: Theory, methods and techniques</i>. Sage, pp. 36-49 <p>OPTIONAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rowley, J. (2007). The wisdom hierarchy: representations of the DIKW hierarchy. <i>Journal of Information Science</i>, 33(2), 163–180. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165551506070706 ● Hans Rosling, Ola Rosling & Anna Rosling Rönnlund (2018). <i>Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World – and Why Things Are Better Than You Think</i>. New York: Flatiron Books.
4 February 23	<p>Big Data, Big Problems: Myths and Truths about Big Data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is big data? ● What is the significance of big data in scientific research? ● What are the challenges? <p>REQUIRED READING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Jin, X., Wah, B. W., Cheng, X., & Wang, Y. (2015). Significance and challenges of big data research. <i>Big Data Research</i>, 2(2), 59-64.

	<p>OPTIONAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Abbasi, A., Sarker, S., & Chiang, R. H. (2016). Big data research in information systems: Toward an inclusive research agenda. <i>Journal of the Association for Information Systems</i>, 17(2), 3. ● Lytras, M. D., Raghavan, V., & Damiani, E. (2017). Big data and data analytics research: From metaphors to value space for collective wisdom in human decision making and smart machines. <i>International Journal on Semantic Web and Information Systems (IJSWIS)</i>, 13(1), 1-10.
<p>5 March 2</p>	<p>Social Changes: Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The aim of this class is to explore different arguments and analyse consequences from different disciplinary perspectives. <p>Propose to the instructor the aspect (and the reading) you are interested in covering or CHOOSE ONE of the following (sign up through Google Classroom):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Betsch, C., Korn, L., Sprengholz, P., Felgendreff, L., Eitze, S., Schmid, P., & Böhm, R. (2020). Social and behavioral consequences of mask policies during the COVID-19 pandemic. <i>Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences</i>, 117(36), 21851-21853. AND Bonaccorsi, G., Pierri, F., Cinelli, M., Flori, A., Galeazzi, A., Porcelli, F., ... & Pammolli, F. (2020). Economic and social consequences of human mobility restrictions under COVID-19. <i>Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences</i>, 117(27), 15530-15535. 2. Bol, D., Giani, M., Blais, A., & Loewen, P. J. (2020). The effect of COVID-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy?. <i>European Journal of Political Research</i>. 3. Hale, T., Petherick, A., Phillips, T., & Webster, S. (2020). Variation in government responses to COVID-19. <i>Blavatnik school of government working paper</i>, 31. 4. Kavanagh, M. M., & Singh, R. (2020). Democracy, Capacity, and Coercion in Pandemic Response—COVID 19 in Comparative Political Perspective. <i>Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law</i>. 5. Power, K. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the care burden of women and families. <i>Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy</i>, 16(1), 67-73. 6. Shakil, M. H., Munim, Z. H., Tasnia, M., & Sarowar, S. (2020). COVID-19 and the environment: A critical review and research agenda. <i>Science of the Total Environment</i>, 141022. 7. Spadaro, A. (2020). COVID-19: Testing the Limits of Human Rights. <i>European Journal of Risk Regulation</i>, 1-9. 8. Sukharev, O. S. (2020). Economic crisis as a consequence COVID-19 virus attack: risk and damage assessment. <i>Quantitative Finance and Economics</i>, 4(2), 274-293.
<p>6 March 9</p>	<p>Gender Bias and Inequality: Where is the Big Data for Women?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why is the world and its resources still run by men? ● Why are meaningful jobs and careers still comprised mostly of men? ● Why is the lack of gender diversity particularly prevalent in technology? ● How does this preponderance of men affect the lives of women and other minorities who are striving for equality? <p>REQUIRED READING (sign up through Google Classroom):</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● One chapter from: Perez, C. C. (2019). Invisible women: Exposing data bias in a world designed for men. Vintage.
<p>7 March 16</p>	<p>Development: Does Foreign Aid Work? (I - SIMULATION)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How does foreign aid work? <p>REQUIRED READING:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Bräutigam, D., & Knack, S. (2004). Foreign Aid, Institutions, and Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa. <i>Economic Development and Cultural Change</i> 52(2), 255-285. doi:10.1086/380592 <p>Read carefully the first 10 pages of the article (255-265), and skim through the analysis if you wish (266-278). In this session we meet to summarize the main 'findings' from the reading.</p> <p>We will then introduce the simulation and distribute the roles for a foreign aid simulation. Accordingly, you will play the game asynchronously until Monday, March 22. We will discuss the results in session 8, on March 23.</p>
<p>8 March 23</p>	<p>Development: Does Foreign Aid Work? (II - DISCUSSION)</p> <p>In this session we will discuss the outcomes of the simulation you played last week. Think about how things played out and if you can connect the outcomes of our simulation with the reading from the last week. No additional preparation is needed.</p> <p>Some of the questions we will tackle include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How does foreign aid work? (or, is it effective?) ● What are the main challenges? ● Where does the money actually go? ● Should foreign aid be eliminated?
<p>March 29 – April 5, 2021 Spring break</p>	
<p>9 April 6</p>	<p>Climate Crisis: The Paris Agreement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why do we need (how do we know we need) the Paris Agreement? What are the aims? ● Does it stand a chance of bringing global emissions under control? How to achieve compliance? ● Why is it difficult to achieve international climate cooperation? <p>REQUIRED VIDEO</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Christiana Figueres The inside story of the Paris climate agreement - TED Talks 2016 https://www.ted.com/talks/christiana_figueres_the_inside_story_of_the_paris_climate_agreement?language=en <p>REQUIRED READINGS</p>

- Horowitz, C.A. (2016). Paris Agreement. *International Legal Materials*, 55(4), 740-755.
- Savaresi, A. (2016). The Paris Agreement: a new beginning?. *Journal of Energy & Natural Resources Law*, 34(1), 16-26.

OPTIONAL

- Bang, G., Hovi, J., & Skodvin, T. (2016). The Paris Agreement: Short-term and long-term effectiveness. *Politics and Governance*, 4(3), 209-218.
- Bodansky, D. (2016). The legal character of the Paris Agreement. *Review of European, Comparative & International Environmental Law*, 25(2), 142-150.
- Falkner, R. (2016). The Paris Agreement and the new logic of international climate politics. *International Affairs*, 92(5), 1107-1125.
- Urpelainen, J., & Van de Graaf, T. (2018). United States non-cooperation and the Paris agreement. *Climate Policy*, 18(7), 839-851.

10 April 13

Why Do People Vote for Corrupt Politicians?

- What are the factors that affect the extent to which corrupt politicians are held accountable by voters?
- When and why voters ignore corruption?

CHOOSE ONE (sign up through Google Classroom):

1. Anduiza, E., A. Gallego, and J. Muñoz (2013) Turning a Blind Eye: Experimental Evidence of Partisan Bias in Attitudes Toward Corruption. *Comparative Political Studies*, 46 (12): 1664–1692.
2. Bauhr, M., & Charron, N. (2018). Insider or Outsider? Grand Corruption and Electoral Accountability. *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(4), 415–446.
3. De Sousa, L., & de Moriconi, M. (2013). Why voters do not throw the rascals out? A conceptual framework for analysing electoral punishment of corruption. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 60, 471-502.
4. De Vries, C. E., & Solaz, H. (2017). The electoral consequences of corruption. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 20, 391-408.
5. Klašnja, M., & Tucker, J. A. (2013). The economy, corruption, and the vote: Evidence from experiments in Sweden and Moldova. *Electoral Studies*, 32(3), 536-543.
6. Pavão, N. (2018). Corruption as the only option: The limits to electoral accountability. *The Journal of Politics*, 80(3), 996-1010.
7. Winters, M. S., & Weitz-Shapiro, R. (2013). Lacking information or condoning corruption: When do voters support corrupt politicians? *Comparative Politics*, 45, 418-436.

11 April 20

New Media and Political Campaigns: Can Democracy Survive the Internet?

- What's the impact of social media and fake news on elections?
- What are the consequences?

REQUIRED READINGS

- Persily, N. (2017). The 2016 US Election: Can democracy survive the internet?. *Journal of democracy*, 28(2), 63-76.

- Zuiderveen Borgesius, F., Möller, J., Kruijke-meier, S., Ó Fathaigh, R., Irion, K., Dobber, T., ... & de Vreese, C. H. (2018). Online political microtargeting: Promises and threats for democracy. *Utrecht Law Review*, 14(1), 82-96.

OPTIONAL

- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Broersma, M., & Graham, T. (2012). Social media as beat: Tweets as a news source during the 2010 British and Dutch elections. *Journalism Practice*, 6(3), 403-419.
- Donald Trump being banned from social media is a dangerous distraction. By Matt Stoller and Sarah Miller. 11 January 2021.
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/11/trump-twitter-ban-ca-pitol-attack-facebook-youtube-google?fbclid=IwAR00oNGGvCZ-gMeO2nHg0NUGaZ_eqiyeABSTX0ApUXftCATBQDTtWPkfUj0
- Is Facebook undermining democracy in Africa? By Larry Madowo, BBC Africa business editor. 24 May 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48349671>
- Jha, C. K., & Sarangi, S. (2017). Does social media reduce corruption?. *Information Economics and Policy*, 39, 60-71.
- Smyth, T. N., & Best, M. L. (2013). Tweet to trust: social media and elections in West Africa. In *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies and Development: Full Papers-Volume 1* (pp. 133-141). ACM.
- Spain's election and the battle for control of social media. By Natalia Oelsner, Marta Rodriguez and Cristina Abellan-Matamoros. 26 April 2019.
<https://www.euronews.com/2019/04/26/weekend-long-read-social-media-use-in-spain-s-election-campaign-the-good-the-bad-and-the-u>
- How YouTube Radicalized Brazil. By Max Fisher and Amanda Taub. The New York Times. 11 August 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/11/world/americas/youtube-brazil.html?module=inline>

12 April 27

Class Debate - topic to be selected from the following:

- Abortion should be banned
- Education should be tuition free
- Healthcare should be universal
- Democracy should always be promoted
- People should be legally required to get vaccines
- Social media has improved human communication
- All drugs should be legalized

13 May 4

Turning Clicks into Votes: A Case Study of Cambridge Analytica

REQUIRED FILM

- *The Great Hack*. Directed by Karim Amer, Jehane Noujaim. With Brittany Kaiser, David Carroll, Paul-Olivier Dehaye, Ravi Naik. Producers: Karim Amer, Pedro Kos, Geralyn Dreyfous, Judy Korin. 2019 Netflix documentary. 113 minutes

OPTIONAL

- Alexander Nix | 2016 Concordia Annual Summit in New York | Cambridge Analytica - The Power of Big Data and Psychographics
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n8Dd5aVXLCc>
- Carole Cadwalladr | TED2019 | Facebook's role in Brexit — and the threat to democracy
https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy?language=en
- Cadwalladr, C., & Graham-Harrison, E. (2018). The Cambridge analytica files. *The Guardian*, 21, 6-7.
http://davelevy.info/Downloads/cabridgeanalyticafiles%20-theguardian_20180318.pdf

14 May 11

Course Conclusions

- No required readings
- Final papers due by the end of the day

May 17 - 21, 2021
Completion week

Addendum to the Syllabus (February 2, 2021)



You can send me any assignment the latest 2 days before the deadline (weekends don't count) to receive comments and improve it. As many times as you want.



In grading, I will focus a lot on effort. Trying and failing is an integral part of learning.



Midterm and final grade: I will ask you to send me an argument about your suggestion of the grade for your work.



Reflection: keep in your notes a track of what you learned in each session – or what remained unclear.

HOW TO WORK IN THIS COURSE

- Be prepared, follow the weekly readings and guiding questions on Google Classroom
- Follow any additional small tasks and course announcements – I will always post in the GS stream
- Keep notes: follow your listening and thinking skills. Note down after every session one or two main things you learned that day – or which are still confusing.
- It does not matter if you don't fully understand the WHOLE text: try to identify what is the argument the author is making + what evidence (s)he is using. See if you are convinced and why
- Chances are we won't find answers to most of the questions we will discuss. Don't get frustrated; it's the nature of social sciences and academic work. We will, however, understand better different types of answers and arguments.
- Doing your best is surely going to be good enough 😊